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ABSTRACT

This report describes a pilot school's experiences with new governance techniques involving a high degree of student participation. A staff member account of these experiences describes the structure used by the school for staff-student power sharing and discusses staff and student reaction to this structure. He provides a personal assessment of the failures and the successes of the experiment. (JF)

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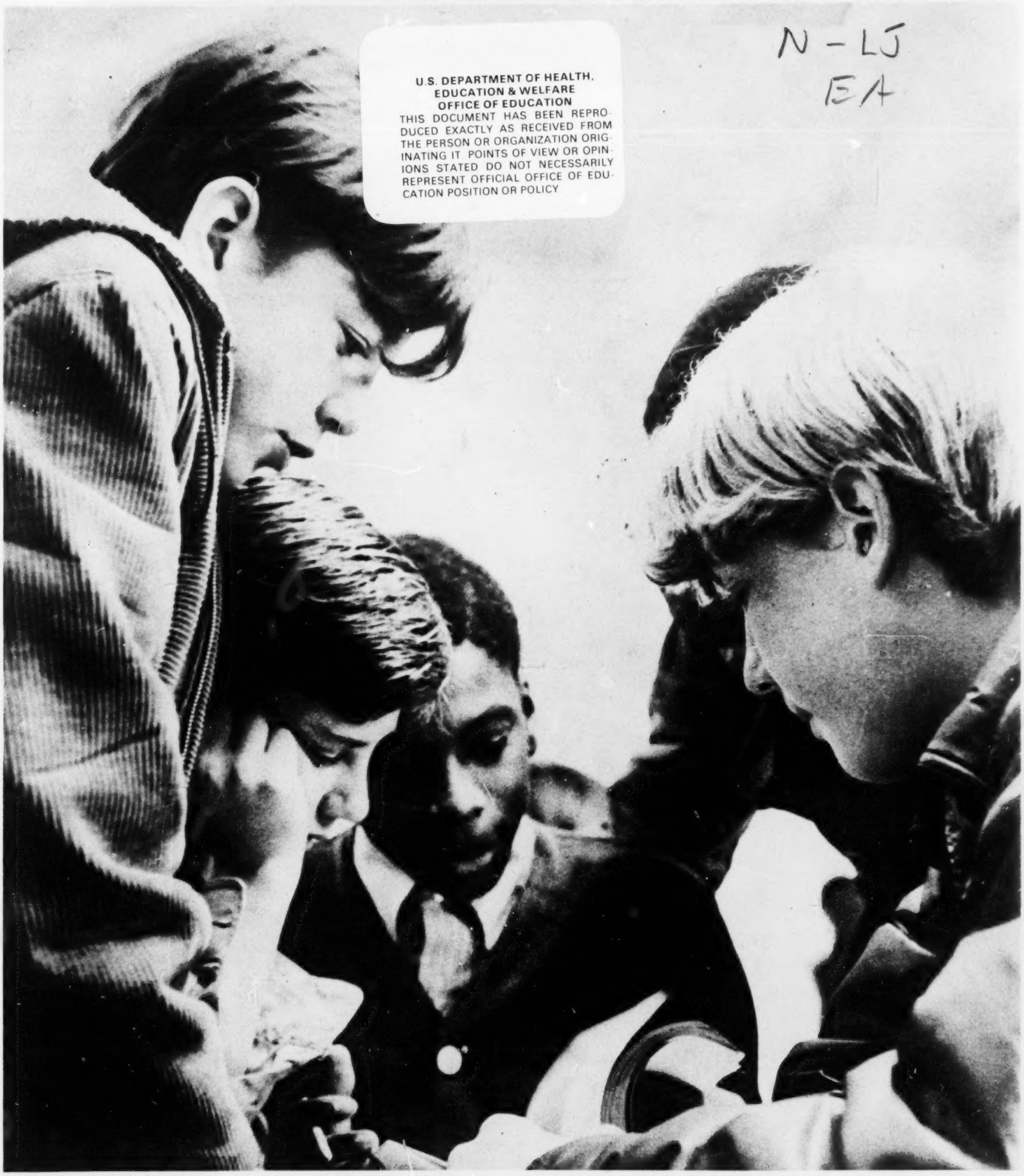

EA 003 780

GOVERNANCE IN THE PILOT SCHOOL

1970-71

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Cambridge Pilot School Program
Cambridge, Mass.

PILOT SCHOOL GOVERNANCE

1970-1971

Joel Sirkin

August, 1971

Cambridge Pilot School Program

Cambridge, Mass.

NOTE

The Camridge Pilot School is an experimental sub-school located within Rindge Technical High School and operated as a joint venture by the City of Cambridge School Department and the Harvard Graduate School of Education. The school enrolled 120 freshmen and sophomores from both Cambridge High Schools in 1970-71, the second year of operation. Both entering groups of ninth-graders were selected from volunteers in such a way as to guarantee a cross-section of the city's schools and social groups, as well as all ability levels and types of future plans. New students were oriented in summer programs in both 1969 and 1970. Additional freshmen will enter in the fall of 1971 as the school begins its third year of activity.

Students plan programs individually, from a variety of courses and activities offered within the Pilot School, or as needed from the courses available at either of the two high schools. Staff are drawn from many sources, including regular teachers within the Cambridge system, experienced teachers working for advanced degrees at the School of Education, Master's candidates at several universities, faculty from Harvard University, resource people from the community of greater Boston, and capable students from nearby colleges and secondary schools. Each full-time staff member is the adviser of five or six students, and is responsible for being fully informed about these individuals' academic life, and their non-school life as well, as it affects the school situation.

The school was started as an experiment in flexibility within a large urban school system, and to try ways of bringing students directly into the management of the school's affairs. Within the Pilot School there is virtually no grouping by class or grade or ability, nor is there any prescribed course of study to be taken en bloc. Further to encourage the conversation and shared activity across some of the boundaries that often divide youngsters, all students were required to take part in a daily meeting of twelve randomly chosen students and two staff, who developed their own agenda, either in or out of school. These Home Groups had been tried in both summer sessions, and were an experiment in both structure and content within the regular school year.

Further information on the school and its history and programs is available in various publications, or by calling the school at 617-491-4344. For the school year 1971-72, Fred S. Bock is the school's Director.

INTRODUCTION

It is perhaps natural that in a period of escalating criticism of the schools and increasing clamor for change, that attention should turn to the decision-making process. Some want to fix blame, to discover where the awful present situation was allowed to come about; others want to know how the engine runs in order to take over the controls--either by licensing and the usual protocol, or by hijacking. (In the intense community meetings at the Graduate School of Education after police routed students from University Hall several years ago, I remember one student standing up to say, "Well, we want to see the constitution of the university, so we can find out just who runs it.") In the case of the public schools, partly as a legacy from the Progressive era of governmental reform, the schools are somewhat isolated from the mainstream of politics, and this fact, combined with the generally mushy "helping" rhetoric of educators, has perpetuated the professional dogma that "we are <u>all</u> interested in the welfare of the children, aren't we?" The immediate corollary of this proposition is that this implied consensus of goals and union of interests justifies giving over the schools to hands of self-regulated bureaucrats. Thus the political facts of divergent interests have been blunted, at least so far as decisions about educational substance are concerned (though not in the patronage functions of school boards I would assume). These interests are surfacing now as the assumption of actual or even potential consensus breaks down. While the NEA for years attacked the "blue-collar" rhetoric of workers-and-bosses and the anti-administration militance of the AFT (AFL-CIO), even the grey lady of the NEA has recently voted to change drastically its own membership requirements for non-teachers as it discovers that principals really do think like management at times, whatever the rhetoric. Outside the profession, of course, the general community has in many areas been questioning both the forms of control (at-large elections, elaborate culture-bound examination and promotion systems) and the substance of education

designed by those in control. The same issues--the effort to redefine bases of power and legitimacy--are obviously present in the relationship between students and the schools, but they are coming to public attention more slowly and with much more mixed results and reactions.

Just as subgroups of the adult population--either by inclination or actual grievance--fight hardest for the "rights" of all the rest, groups of students with particular feelings have pressed the system for changes--more intellectual flexibility for some, less behavioral restriction for others. But these fragmentary efforts lack a political theory, despite the urgings of radical newspapers and organizers, and often stop short after small-scale victories on narrow grounds, or--sadly--after effective campaigns of repression or silence by principals and boards of education. A "high school bill of rights" that was circulated to schools in the Boston area in fall, 1970, included such far-reaching items as:

1. The right for students and teachers to veto any administrative decision concerning the firing of a teacher.
2. The right to hold unauthorized meetings.
3. The right to a trial by a jury of students pending any dsiciplinary actions.

Such a clear-cut antagonistic veto-power stance would have a predictable effect on school people; surprisingly, it also found few student supporters.

Various adult students of the schools are articulating the importance of changing the authority relations within schools, both intellectual and otherwise, along lines and for reasons that might mystify the intended beneficiaries. Alan Westin, Columbia University law professor, recently documented in massive detail the extent of "undemocratic practices" in schools, as reported by students. He began with a curriculum interest, but ended by urging that schools end the double-standard of civics-class rhetoric and daily repression which students were quick to label as hypocrisy. Joining the apparently large effect of the sense-of-control variable in the Coleman study to the current idea of the powerful

"hidden curriculum," many have suggested that school policy-making and procedures should be restructured to make more real the students' control over their in-school lives--if only to promote achievement,let alone revolution. Almost any study that involves intensive discussion with students, from whatever perspective (see the recent Massachusetts Advisory Council report on secondary education for Massachusetts), documents the fact that students themselves, if not as radical as their more outspoken college-age elders, are at least unhappy about their assumed status as passive consumers of a predetermined product, and as prisoners of a social system rarely of their own devising. Lastly, as adults' criticism of education in general grows, or at least gets better-publicized, even if no substantive alternatives are proposed, at the very least the effect is to undermine the infallibility of the professionals and to suggest that others in control could do little worse.

But when the focus turns from the problem to some possible solutions, there is little to guide a system thatwanted to change. The snail's pace of relaxation of traditional board controls in favor of community or decentralized groups--of adults--shows what can be expected when the students get in line. But beyond the general question of power alone, there are difficult matters of substance--which are illuminated in this report of some months' experience at the Pilot School. For example, what decisions should be made by who? How can responsibility be joined with authority, given the shifting base of involvement of students over time and on different issues? What about sub-groups within the students body who may agitate on issues that bore the majority, or which may not even be perceived as issues (e.g. ending discrimination against a minority)? What will genuine sharing of power mean for the traditional hierarchical chain of accountability? Should this new role be part of every student's education, perhaps with required turns at making decisions? (This might raise questions which teachers regularly face, of matching the task to the student in some rough way; should someone decide that students are "ready" to decide something?)

But the notion of decision-making-readiness would no doubt be dismissed as paternalism by many, both in and out of schools. The thicket of questions can be traced to fundamental problems of rationale: why should such changes be made? For educational reasons, such as are suggested by analysts of Coleman, that achievement or other traditional school outputs will be affected by students' improved identification with the institution's policies? For moral reasons, in line with the generally increased attentions to fundamental rights in every sphere of life. (Courts have already delved into the traditionally "administrative" areas of student discipline and in-school speech and dress.) On grounds of efficiency, that better decisions would result? Butthen are there boundaries for the decision-makers? Could a group of students and teachers, say, disband their school for a while?

To give a flavor of the state-of-the-art, I can report on a conference which I attended for the Pilot School in September, 1970. Called by the "Educational Change Team," a group of psychologists and educators at the University of Michigan Institute for Social Research, who specialize in "crisis intervention" in troubled high schools, we were to help with the next steps after the crisis. Their work indeed put out fires, but they quickly came to the realization that poor communications and impersonal institutional procedures were at the bottom of many specific grievances, and the realization also that they had few concrete models of what might replace the status quo. What the conferees agreed on after several days of compating notes on some of the most often-mentioned "innovative" and "participatory" schools in the country, was the all but inevitable sequence of problems to be encountered, and the lack of clarity about genuine successes. Town meetings had flopped in a dozen schools; teachers had dominated hundreds of power-equalizing rap sessions or committees; discontented groups of students had sabotaged the work of other groups, and so on. Even in an idyllic rural free-school, where community decision-making might presumably flower best on the bases of

similarity of life-style, shared experiences, lack of external contraints--even there the process was painful and often became the whole curriculum of the school to the exclusion of all else. Such a result is open to various evaluations, but the representatives from that school were at pains to point out potential negative effects of only going half-way into reallocation of power--such as sham councils, lack of commitment to the results of the process, manipulation by the canny of the naive, hasty efforts in the name of efficiency, etc.

What follows is one Pilot School staff member's attempt to describe and analyze the school's second-year efforts in this area, through the medium of a taped conversation. He alludes to the experiences of the previous year (1969-70) which are discussed in greater detail in the First Year Report. That year included an attempt to write and implement in Town Meetings a constitution for the whole school group, staff and students, which proved unsuccessful for overwhelming lack of interest. Instead, on an ad hoc basis, a double-period class called Humanities suspended itself when needed, and met as a committee of half the school to discuss policy matters such as discipline, organization of the school schedule, hiring of staff, etc. This pattern produced a conflict between the school's academic goals, held by many of the students and some staff, and the participatory goals. Even within the participatory goals, many people felt that that setting was not successful in drawing out the most possible individuals. (The two Humanities classes had 30 students in each; the total school included 60 students and 20 staff the first year.) Joel discusses how the second-year format of council and Home Groups seemed a logical response to some of the first-year dilemmas, and what the result of the apparent logic turned out to be.

In explaining the situation which developed, Joel points to certain factors--factors which have been disputed by other readers of his account. Obviously this is not a research report, with confidence levels in the statements made: it is one person's attempt to reconstruct a terribly complex situation in which

he was personally involved. Others have suggested, for example, that the account lacks a perspective on the general problem of leadership in the school, and of the role of the coordinators as seen by others than one of them himself. Joel touches on this on pages 14 and 16, but the criticism cannot be refuted. Joel's account will have served a purpose if it sharpens the internal analysis within the school by forcing people to look more carefully at why things happened as they seem to have done. Externally, others may profit from his account by seeing issues to think about in advance and to consider in any program design with similar goals. As to his own role, one can only sympathize: what should be the role of an adult who wants to "empower" others? How do you give away control without gaining simply chaos? This may be a premonition for other schools; within the school, Joel may have started a clarification of where one of the project's central hopes got lost on the way to implementation.

August, 1971

Frederick Mulhauser
Pilot School Researcher

PILOT SCHOOL GOVERNANCE, 1970-71

Joel Sirkin

Background and History

Since I wasn't at the school the first year and the first summer, I think I have what might be a valuable perspective. When I first started meeting with the "sacred six," the planning committee for the second year, I was trying to hear the things that the school was about and also where were the problems. In terms of the governance question, I heard that the school had attempted to discuss issues and decide them in town meetings open to everybody, and that it hadn't worked. And I also had sat in on a couple of morning and afternoon Humanities class meetings, where thirty students and six or eight staff met, so I had some idea of what such meetings actually were. I was curious because I certainly shared the ethic that students should be involved in decision-making on a co-equal basis virtually. And since I accepted the aim, I was interested to find out why the ideals and the process that were initially set forth didn't work.

When I spoke to students I found out a couple of things, very clearly. The big meetings were no good because the staff did all the talking, and on top of that, many of the students didn't understand the vocabulary, or the whole way issues were framed. Once students saw staff talk like that, and saw they didn't have any of the skills, the advocacy tools to speak up and rebut a point, they wouldn't consider speaking out against a staff member who was so much more articulate. Just speaking at all before a large group of sixty or seventy people made many of the kids very nervous. So for a number of reasons, a good many students told me they hadn't felt they were a part of decisions that were made in large groups the first summer.

I don't think the staff ever really acknowledged this fact, either, that they do have more power than the students, that they're not equals in ability to participate in governance.

As I looked back on the first year, I thought, let's keep the idea of trying to get the school working, making decisions as a group, students and staff, but let's change some of the elements of it so that maybe the kids can have an outlet to speak on questions in smaller groups and smaller forms. I heard that had worked a few times in the Humanities class in the spring, but it bothered people to keep "interrupting" class work.

Summer 1970

When I first really worked with the staff and the students, during the second summer program in 1970, I kept thinking about governance issues and how to keep the idea alive. The planning group at the end of the first year had set up this time called Home Group, which would be an hour a day the next year for every student, in a small group of twelve, with two staff. One of the purposes of Home Group was to be the kind of governance discussion which had "interrupted" the other classes during the first year. I thought that if one aim of the groups was also to encourage students to communicate with all sorts of other types, that maybe school-wide issues of governance could be a part of these groups' focus, as well as being a smaller setting without the problem of the town meeting crowd. I thought that school issues presented in small groups would be something more personal, that might draw students out and get them involved in the groups, and I saw that if that happened, we'd have a good decentralized system for polling student views and really getting the students' voices heard.

To use the home groups in some way as the place for discussing -- and even making -- policy, we came up with the idea of a central body which would put together issues, pros and cons, for the groups to discuss. At first I didn't think of a large group at all, since I wanted to avoid that whole problem of size; just a few people that could identify questions, tease out certain important choices, put down the various arguments, and send it out to the school for discussion.

Big questions: student behavior, possibly curriculum for the semester, hiring policies. I never thought about the school's budget, in terms of this kind of decision-making, which is interesting because it came up as one of the first issues at the council once it was formed. I think we thought more in terms of "educational" issues, partly because it was one of my responsibilities in the summer to coordinate the whole business of getting out a course-catalogue before the session was over, so students could make up their programs. And my experience doing that maybe got me thinking about that sort of issue for a council.

(We did set up a committee, and I had a group of kids that was working on planning the first semester curriculum from the first day of summer.)

There was a whole other route that our thinking could have taken. During the same summer (1970) there was another group formed of staff and students. Arthur Blackman, Pauline Demetri, and Corb Smith were the staff, and though I don't remember all the students, I know Danny Demeika was in the group. They worked hard on some questions and at one point I sat in with them at a meeting to give them my thinking on something. I remember the meeting because my thinking wasn't clear and it was also very clear to me that that group was working on a whole other set of questions than I had been thinking about. The questions they were most concerned

with were how to work out problems between kids and teachers or kids and kids. They seemed to be going at a substantive question of the personal relationships in the school, and how to structure them best. I was thinking of forms and channels, mostly in terms of process. My thinking on issues was: big questions about education would be the meat. I know that they kept working, but I never had any other contact with them, and their plans never got anywhere, or even to a wider audience that I recall.

Fall, 1970

When the school year began, the first part of the year was without a governance system of any kind. Things had to be done: schedule every student by hand, working out room arrangements, that sort of thing. Not exactly what you would call "issues." After that, we needed to get the budget straight, so I worked on it and at that point it was a big controversy, despite our pretty rich resources. I think rightly so. I'm not sure what Steve was busy doing, but we both were pretty busy, as I recall. I think it's instructive that governance didn't become a pressing priority until the curriculum was set and the budget was allocated and people were scheduled into courses.

As I recall, we had a couple of staff meetings trying to pick up threads from the summer discussions and kick around some ideas. We finally got to the point where we recognized -- as we seem to recognize and then forget over and over again -- that for a big group, a staff group, or an open school meeting to function effectively you need individuals who have a plan, or program formulated to present to people so they can react to it, not just leave everybody out there to build their own plan, starting cold. So a couple of plans were put on paper and I put down on one sheet my idea for a council that would send out issues to the school. Maybe the other

group in the summer put some things on paper, too. I don't think that at this point the plans were discussed at all in home groups. Home groups were struggling along trying to get their feet on the ground. After a couple of weeks, a big meeting at Longfellow came about. The whole staff was there and a large number of kids. At the meeting some changes were made in the proposal I had written, in the composition of the council. The council, as I had originally planned it, had two coordinators, Steve and myself, and the home group coordinator, Rob Riordan, who I saw as a vital communication link. However the council would be set up, since he was coordinating home groups, I thought he would be able to take these issues through his network back to the home groups. You can see how I had sort of a flow chart idea. (In retrospect I think this was a mistake, because Rob was overburdened already with so many things, he could hardly monitor a whole new program for 120 students and 20 staff and be involved in a council, too.) Those three people were to be permanent members of the council, not elected. And then there were two students and two staff members, for a seven-man council. In my first model, students would serve after the fashion of jury duty. You had to go on the council when your name was picked. But people objected to that. They thought that it should be either a lottery or an election, so we debated. There was a long period in the debates when people thought the lottery would be better, to avoid any bad feeling in terms of people not being elected. But in the end we did settle for an election, for both students and staff, and increased their numbers to three of each. We also said just one coordinator, Steve or I, would share that position. We dropped the home group coordinator, and added on three parents, to be chosen by lot. That caused a lot of discussion, because kids at school have always been opposed

to any strong role for parents, and some staff have little faith in parents either. I had heard from the first year that the town meetings took as much time with trivial issues as they did with important, and lots of time got wasted that way. I thought to myself, "There should be some more coordinated central body to make lots of these trivial decisions." I didn't jump to the idea that there should be a principal to make those decisions, at that point. I still had the consensus model in mind, and I felt if we had a small representative group they could actually take care of a lot of small matters that the larger school shouldn't have to bother with. As planned, on big questions the Council would send them to the whole school to discuss in home group and then vote on. That part of the original proposal stayed intact, but it was refined and improved. There was to be a distinction between major and minor issues. We allowed anybody who wanted to to come to the council meetings which would be open. And on every question that was brought up before the council there would be a vote as to whether or not the question itself was a major or minor issue. Anybody who showed up could vote on that. If it was voted that this was a major question by a majority of the people at the meeting, this question would be discussed by the council which would try to raise some of the issues, and would ultimately formulate questions to send to the home groups. The home groups would debate, and they would vote on major questions. Their vote would be final. If an issue was voted as a minor question at the Council meeting the council would decide the issue finally.

The first meeting where the plan for the Council was molded, with all these amendments that I've been speaking about, was well-attended. And the idea was that this would be the meeting to put the plan together, after which there would be an open meeting for anyone who wanted to come

to propose amendments, prior to ratification by each home group. At that second meeting very few people showed up, twenty maybe; many staff, a few students. At that meeting the amendment was made, I think, that a two-thirds vote was required for the whole school to pass a major question.

Getting the Council Going

And so that was planning and creating the council. It took a while to get it into operation. So far as the formation of it, it was pretty much understood that I was going to take most of the business there, since Steve was doing other things and we had informally divided the spheres of authority into inside and outside the building. I was working on the inside aspects, governance, curriculum, and budget. But we dealt with them in a different order, as I mentioned, governance being last, chronologically. I went about holding elections to get members on the council. Elections were held -- my original proposal had rotating members on a draft system, and then the idea was kids should be elected. Finally what we did do was to make a compromise -- at that first formulating meeting -- to elect two kinds of members -- permanent and rotating. I don't know why, all this seemed very important at the time. The permanent members would be elected for a term, and the rest would come from a lottery among volunteers, not a jury system, or draft. We had the elections for the permanent staff and the permanent student. Kevin Watson was the student elected, and Bob Burns and Joel Nwagbaraocha tied, so we had another vote and Joel was elected. From the volunteers, the lottery produced students Rebecca Lesses and Larry Chang, and staff members Sally Follensbee and Steve Ambush. There were about forty student volunteers, and the lottery gave us these -- mostly Peabody types. To get parents, my first impulse was to select at random, parents from both the incoming

freshmen and the sophomores, one parent from each bunch, at random call them up and ask them if they wanted to be on the council. But at that point (Oct. 19) there was a parent meeting where we announced that people who were interested in being on a council should notify us, and that we'd choose by lottery. Of course this put a heavy burden on parents, who probably didn't know what we were talking about. We only got three volunteers, Mrs. Slive, Mrs. Scanlon, and Mr. Hillman, all from the Peabody School district, which is hardly representative; but we picked Mrs. Slive and Mrs. Scanlon and they formed the council.

Ironically, we spent so much time on all the legislating and in getting the whole thing organized, the first lot of members were the only lot. They stayed through November and December. The council got started in late October. It ran through Christmas time and stayed on for a couple of meetings after vacation to make a clean break of it in January at the mid-year. The council never got started again after that.

The Council in Operation

We spent the first couple of meetings setting up our communication system which I think we did a good job on. The group of people worked very nicely. I thought the group represented a fairly good cross-section of the school. Some parts of the school weren't represented, clearly, but Kevin represented a certain block that Larry Chang and Rebecca certainly didnt, just as Steve Ambush and Sally knew different people. Joel certainly had a constituency, and I knew one group of students that I spoke to more frequently than other staff did. So I thought our group was pretty good, and we worked well together. We set up a rotating chairmanship and rotating secretary. We tried to solicit business. Generally the procedure I used at the beginning

was that I would bring the questions and I'd speak on what I thought the issues were in each of the questions so that we didn't waste a lot of time trying to figure out what we were to do. I guess, to be honest, I probably had a major role in all the meetings in terms of formulating questions, suggesting how we might proceed. Much of what I said did not in fact become decisions; people didn't accept it, but it became the basis for discussion. I remember I said to myself, maybe I should be more quiet in these meetings, but I always was caught between being quiet myself versus getting the group to be an efficient body, getting things done in less than four hours. The other staff members, Sally, Joel, Steve Ambush, all asked good questions, and the staff definitely took the initiative more than students, although students asked a fair number of questions, and made a fair number of points. We were very careful as a group to make sure we asked students and brought them in, and didn't just do the usual lip service of asking one and once we got any student to speak, stop there. We really tried to get them all to say what they felt. I remember on the jury question, especially, Larry Chang had some conservative views that I didn't at all agree with, and I was in a bind. I remember wondering whether I should speak what I felt, even though in essence that would be to try and talk Larry down. I didn't want him to feel obliged or pressured by staff. And in the end I only said, "Gee, I feel that would be a mistake for the jury system." I asked other kids what they thought and I think Kevin and Rebecca also agreed that what Larry was saying was probably a little rigid. When parents spoke it became clear to me that there were what you might call "levels of inside-ness," from me,to the other staff, then the kids, and last the parents. When the parents would raise questions, kids could answer them, and so on up the levels. There were real problems of information gaps between these levels, which took a lot of time. I don't think the council was seen as

"belonging" to any one group, even though the students definitely were the third leg so far as talking and being heard from. I don't think they felt shut out, because all of them did keep coming to the meetings. And they did run a couple of the meetings, as we all did in turn. I don't feel that they were deeply involved with the thing, but it was an improvement on a meeting of thirty where only one or two spoke.

Some Issues Raised in Council Deliberations

Right at the beginning I remember one matter which raised a lot of sticky issues which we couldn't resolve, and which therefore we dodged. This was about continuing to pay for Carl K's piano lessons. There had been a commitment made to do this for the previous school year, and it was unclear whether or not the commitment was open-ended. He believed the school meant to pay for his piano lessons forever, or at least for two years. So I brought it in, and we debated it. The issue raised some good questions about who in the school should get what, and how, and we had a fine discussion. But the question we didn't really get to was who finally controls the money in the school? Does the council have the say to spend money, or who does? Here we were just starting, and already with a constitutional crisis; between staff meeting and council, who rules. It never really got straightened out.

Another example of this unclear relationship was the decision about a Black Studies or guidance program. My own feeling was that the council was used. The staff meeting was divided on the question, and they passed it on to us, saying, in a sense: "O.K., we'll let this black studies thing go. But we don't want to be the ones to decide, so it's official only after the council approves it." It was a gesture that the council was going to make a decision, but what could we do, or how could we decide something where the staff itself didn't want to make a decision?

I remember when Omeka Agu came to council meetings while his Black Studies proposal was in limbo and we were discussing the piano lesson question, he kept asking me, "Well, who has this power? Is it made clear? Don't you have to spell these things out? The council and the staff has to be straightened out." Personally, though I was more or less running the council, I only sensed that those are real problems; I didn't sit down and fight it out with those problems. I took more the attitude, "Let's just keep the thing in motion, it's valuable at this point, we've got this council going, let's keep it in motion and not try to create greater complexity," which meant, of course, to avoid the heart of the problem. And that is a reflection on me, the way I generally handled the whole coordinatorship at that point. I was <u>doing</u> a lot of things, but there were a lot of key issues that I guess I wasn't exerting real leadership over, which I might have and didn't.

These sticky questions came up again with our last project, which was to test the notion of a discipline system. I think there was a feeling, not just on my part, that we needed something more systematic in this area. We'd had an all-student jury on one case, but now we were thinking the council could address itself to this general question of student disciplining not at the level of cutting class or smaller fracases in the school, but on the major offenses. Again, the discussions I thought were excellent. We designed a questionnaire which we sent out to the home groups. (As I think of it, I think it's curious that I haven't mentioned the home groups very much. Some things got out to the home groups, but they don't snap to my mind. I should check over the agendas, because I know we did send other things other than the questionnaire to the home groups.) But this was really a good bit of work, and it was good work. We identified for

ourselves some steps we needed to go through in our thinking, and laid out the questions to guide us. Parents at this point were very helpful because even though they didn't necessarily know the situation in the school very well, they could give us feedback on how parents would feel and how parents might respond. When we got back results from the questionnaire and studied them, some patterns clearly emerged, we clarified some hard questions, debated them, and knocked out what I thought was a pretty good plan. It was obviously a major question, and it went to a vote in home groups. We got a majority vote but we didn't get a two-thirds vote, so the plan never went into effect. Just at that point, in January, the semester changed, so did my schedule, our plan lost, and the whole council went into suspended animation. The whole plan is still there for anybody who wants to use it.

Unrealistic Expectations for the Council

One thing that might be valuable to go into a little further is the matter of the relationship of the governance system to the real decision structure of the staff. I've alluded to it. In retrospect I see that the council was always in a strange position. I think that we, the staff, talked about it in terms of a body that would make decisions for the school. I spoke of my own non-leadership role, and many staff may have agreed that we needed more firm guidance from somewhere. This was an attempt to structure a body, a collective body that would have power to lead the school. Now, as I think of it, we were incredibly naive, and also I don't think people meant it. First, the naive aspect -- which is an easier sort of thing to look at -- becomes plain when you recall the fact that the council met once a week, on Monday afternoon, and our meetings lasted three or four hours. With ten people we only managed to get through two or three items and do any kind of

job on them. In a complex school, with 120 kids and 30 adults there are so many things that have to be done during the day, or the week, that involved decisions, leadership, that it was ridiculous to think of such an inexperienced group in terms of being able to do that function.

We might have been better to look at it as a legislative body, to deal with a <u>few</u> important questions. As I think back on it, we were wrong with this whole notion of major and minor questions. Most of the minor questions should have been settled by Steve or myself, as coordinators, central administrators, or whatever. I mean they were that minor. It was very valuable and instructive for kids, staff, and parents to talk about the budget and Carl K's piano expenses, but it's the kind of decision that any of us should have made, Steve or myself or any sound administrator, in fifteen or thirty seconds. One way or the other, it would have been closed, and yet we spent hours just getting background data into everyone's system. If I was going to re-do it, I think the council could have purpose if it dealt with a couple of very major questions and had plenty of time. It might be an executive study group. If Steve or myself had been good administrators who made decisions, all sorts of decisions, we might have been better able to use the council, to get reactions on things we felt were important for the school to talk about. That way I wouldn't be negative: "Hey, listen, we don't think you coordinators should make this decision," but more positive, to help the administrator, but certainly not to make all sorts of decisions. It was just wrong, a mistake.

And even so, that's the lesser of the two problems that I think we've had in terms of expectations. The second is more difficult to pick apart, and involves the school's ideology, maybe from the very beginning of the school. Now idealistic and reformist teachers and educational planners (and I include myself) can <u>talk</u> about the school as a place where there'd

be collective decision making, and I don't doubt their intentions. But I do think that the nature of people generally is that staff or older people are not going to effortlessly give the power away and let the students, who are the majority in the school, make very, very critical decisions and live with them. The staff would have been willing for some complicated, responsible body to take over, but they didn't realize the steps they might have to go through to reach that sort of goal -- especially for many students. And if it didn't seem as though the new "body" would work, staff kept on meeting themselves, because things had to get done. This indicated the confusion of the staff, who wanted to give a council power, but didn't. When Omeka came in with his proposal for Afro, the staff didn't say, "This is not a question for the staff, go to the council and let them decide." People took the issue, decided it and then said, "Let the council also have a say." I don't think any of us thought in terms of "this is an issue for the council, it's not an issue for the staff, and stop! It's hands off." There was never a general "constitutional" discussion at staff meeting. As far as the council itself, we talked about the power relationships in the school once or twice, but as for causing a governmental crisis and saying, "Look, the council is making decisions, staff, hands off," we never did do that. In retrospect I think most of the kids and staff on the council just didn't see as I've been describing.

I think a common response would have been, "Well, I go to the school, I work in the school, but I'm not responsible to get a government going." People did look to the heads of the school, Steve and myself, and other people who were coordinators, to make things move. It's ironic that the group was waiting for leadership to make a group the central power -- expecting the leaders to organize themselves out of a job almost. So the abstraction of people making decisions together really wasn't, in fact,

true. At various levels, everyone was waiting for other people who had more information or more authority to act. Just as the whole staff never moved to get the council really going, within the council itself people waited for me to say, "All right, this week we're going to take up this issue, the constitutional crisis."

This lack of clarity in the role of the council was made obvious when we agreed to set aside a certain room as a quiet lunchroom, in response to student requests. The council said, "We'll set up an experiment for a month and see how it goes." I think it worked for two weeks, but then about the third week kids began bringing the cards and radios back in, and there was a problem of enforcement. Who would stand behind the council's plan? The answer was, nobody. The "quiet" group of kids just got swamped, and it seemed no staff saw it as their job to keep the room as we intended. The majority of kids felt they should be able to use it as they had before; staff really didn't feel obligated to enforce the council's decision, and I certainly wasn't going to go it alone.

This is a small example of the general issue of "executing" decisions, which has been a vexed aspect of the school's governance also. Students often pressure to "be involved" in specific matters, but lack any ways to carry out or take responsibility for some decisions -- like whether students should be expelled or asked back after disciplinary actions. The council couldn't follow through on its decisions, without some much more careful accountability system centered on the council. (The co-ordinators have had the same problem, too, unsure of how to insure that <u>their</u> decisions would be carried out. Often they haven't been, as staff or students explicitly reject coordinators' decisions. With authority very diffuse, nobody -- whether individual, staff group, student group, or council -- has ever been able to say definitively that <u>their</u> decisions

were final. There has been an endless circular process of questioning everything, and no "Supreme Court" with the combined prestige and power to stop the debate.

The Second Semester

The demise of the council was the result of a number of factors, such as a change in my university schedule for one thing, but more broadly having to do with a renewed search for some central leadership in the school by a small group of staff who were frustrated. I don't remember being in a deep state of crisis, because we had been through that already, a little earlier. An ad hoc group that Marilyn Bernstein was working with was reorganizing people's allotments of time, and trying to get the coordinators to take more active roles. But this came in conflict with my student life. For myself, personally, I felt that Law School was going to be more trouble in the spring. And I think also, to be honest, because I was very confused about the school and my relationship to it, I think I was more "ready" to step back and so I ended up scheduling myself only half-time at school. I still said, "I wouldn't mind working with the council; I liked it." It was one thing that I had worked on from the beginning and which I felt had some purpoe and was cohesive and had potential.

But as I mentioned, as this group of staff worked and discussed people's time for the second semester, it seemed their view was that there should be more authority in the staff. Steve would be coordinator of daily management, supported by an advisory council of coordinators. And they would make decisions. I remember hearing it a number of times, from staff, "We've got to get some central leadership in this school." And the council didn't figure in it at all. Maybe I should have shared my analysis and said, "Look at the council then, strip away all this junk about minor and major questions." But I didn't, and I think everyone was willing to let

it slide after that. The weak council had never really done anything, and a strong council seemed unlikely -- or at best a whole new complication. I think this general shift in the school's mentality, the idea of leadership from the top, definitely played a part. And there was no push from the "bottom," since the term had expired for the first lot of councilors. They didn't feel that they had to save the organization; they didn't think of themselves as <u>the</u> council, with power to protect and pass on, like the king or the parliament. Because some of them asked me, "Well, what's going on? When are we going to start meeting again?" And I said, "Gee, I don't know, I don't know what's going to happen." So I think, again, it came back to me. Am I going to get the council in gear again? And I think I didn't because I felt the notion of the student/staff council would be an anachronism in the situation.

<u>Some General Conclusions</u>

Trying to tie up all these various themes, and looking towards the future I do feel a school shouldn't drift as we have; there is a need for some sort of leadership, more ideological leadership, a sense of getting the school to face a certain direction, face the set of problems. And probably a need for managerial leadership, one person and a secretary and somebody else who will take care of a lot of business. We could certainly reorganize the staff to work more efficiently, too. Hopefully there could be a division of decisions and channeling to various groups with interests, skills, and accountability in various spheres. So far as the idea of "student involvement," I guess I sense there are only some issues that are important to students. Most of them are things that directly involve students. In <u>our</u> school, there are some things that are important to students in our school, and often it seems to be very personalized,

individual things where students' view the issues in pain/pleasure, bad/good terms. Now it may be that if the school is set up in another way where we made a quantum leap and put kids in genuine positions of real power, or at least straightened out the power set-up, things would be very different, and "other" issues might be more salient. But I still see the staff as divided, as for example, at a recent staff meeting where a majority of the staff felt that they wanted to close the meeting to students and talk just among themselves. Meetings have always been open, and I like that, so to me it's an unsettling decision.

This meeting was a capsule of some of the issues and positions that divide the staff, which I've been circling on. One staff member gave notice that he wanted to discuss a certain student who had been missing a lot of classes and being defiant, and who was apparently beyond much influence by her parents. Students thought that the discussion was going to be about asking her to leave the school, which was a possibility but certainly not the only one. The person who introduced the subject asked that students not be present at the next meeting when it would come up, and this led to a huge discussion.

Among the different arguments that came up were:

1. Staff: We should ask students to leave because they can't handle the responsibility of deciding what to do about a friend of theirs.

2. Student: Don't you trust us? You're hypocritical, just like the government, always talking about how smart we are and never letting us in on things.

3. Staff: Students have a right to want to be here; they want to know if they can be in on the vote, if they can vote to keep this person in the school.

4. Student: Staff meetings have always been open in the past. How come you're changing now?

5. Staff: This is like a trial. A student should be there to defend himself; that's only fair. And so should some friends; everybody else is hostile.

6. Staff: How come we can never talk about anything, but always get into these huge government hassles? If we spend an hour on this tonight, we'll never be able to begin to discuss the questions of how to help any student -- let alone this particular one.

What became clear was that there were a number of different models working in people's heads, and that relates to our difficulty in finding a role for a council all year, I think. The first model could be called "enlightened paternalism."

EP: "Students differ in their capacity to listen, store information, and take part in discussion of issues or other personalities. Running the school is the responsibility of the staff, who will take every opportunity to teach students the skills involved, and who will constantly discuss matters and solicit views from students to the fullest degree. But decisions need to be made by staff, sometimes, for students, and no rhetoric of "involvement" can obscure this. We cannot set up a council without carefully working out its limits."

This is unpopular talk, even though enlightened, and many staff water it down by not taking any general stands, reserving judgment on each case as it comes up; this results in long philosophical discourses at meetings, in an attempt to get back to first principles in deciding what process to use to make each decision. Embedded in all versions, is a sense that it is appropriate for adults to judge youngsters' fitness to participate, that students' own current view of their self-interest should not be enacted immediately in any case.

Some staff seem to be more convinced than this latter group that students' views are legitimate and correct on almost every matter, and that their voices should be heard as a power bloc at least to be negotiated with, if not generally followed. This view probably contains

the corollary that adults cannot always know what is best for students, particularly in urban high schools unlike the schools where staff grew up and learned their own set of values. This group sees student involvement as a moral right, and has fewer doubts about the frameworks which students bring to that involvement (statements #3 and #5, above). Thus, the "Rousseau" position:

> R: "If we really mean what we say about giving students responsibility, then we have to do it, and not inconsistently, either. We have to set up meetings that are open, councils that have some real power, and trust the community as a whole to learn from whatever mistakes happen. Sure, it may be inefficient, and it may take longer to clue the students in on everything that comes along. But we learn from them, too, and it's just not fair any other way; it would be just like a regular school then, and aren't we supposed to be trying something different? On this business of closing the meeting, why not give the individual student the choice, open or closed?"

One interesting fact which adds in to this mix, is that staff have strong convictions of their own on most issues, along with convictions about students' roles, so it's often funny to watch the interplay between the participation arguments and the arguments about the substance of the decision or topic; if people agree with what kids want, they'll argue for participation, and if they disagree, then we get the "immature" arguments. There's one method of avoiding either of these two positions I've described, and that is to take a "therapeutic" model which usually focuses on communication, opening up, sharing, and so on. I guess the assumption behind it is, "If we just talk to each other and really get to know each other, we'll discover that we have a lot of the same interests at heart,

and we'll get rid of some of the defenses that are keeping us apart now." This certainly avoids the tough paternalism, which really makes the kids mad -- and a lot of staff don't know what to say when kids get really mad at them, they sort of wilt. And it is more in keeping with educational ideas of growth and learning to work in groups, and all that.

But what I've been describing is pretty far from what people actually say and talk about in meetings; we've just never been able to get some of these different assumptions sorted out, even though we do end up with decisions somehow. As statement #6 indicates, the time taken on this type of discussion, when you repeat it over and over again, cuts into the time available to deal with some of the educational problems that a staff might be grappling with, which in turn might have a big effect on students' satisfaction with the school -- so that's a hard choice. But the result of not getting clear on the "constitution" of the school, and not getting everyone's commitment to live by it and not keep rewriting it, is that we have no clear model of governance, except the staff meeting, which alternates between the various models I've described. The real political model hasn't really been used; I think it's distasteful to teachers, who would like to think the world could become another way. We've shied away from it, and made our "political" settings into therapeutic ones, because we can't allow voting by large numbers of students who differ a lot from us.

I think it's clear that this staff, or at least the people who have been in it for the first two years, do not fully want or know how to share power, and will not live by decisions on some things made by students. For example, I don't think we would ever set up a fund with a large chunk of the budget that students ran. Now if we were to do that, I don't know, maybe things would turn upsidedown in the school and students would jump to take on a new role. But since I don't think the school is

going to do that, so far as I can tell on next year's plans, I think that student involvement will come in places where students want to be involved.

So, given all these factors, I go back to the idea that maybe the council should be a body which is advisory to a leader, which could hack out issues and then go back to kids, to get feedback. It could be one of several communication mechanisms. I realize that sounds just like the old student council. But I think separate from that, I think there still has to be some way -- and I'm not exactly sure how or what -- some way that things that are important to kids are structured so that kids can get involved in talking them over. I think a good example is another topic that staff closed a recent meeting on, a type of post mortem on a class that's ended. (It was closed because it was a type of discussion the staff doesn't often have, and some people were a little nervous about how it would go. I guess they thought the kids would just add too much extra.) I think kids, obviously, were very concerned that staff would talk about their behavior in that class, and they wanted to be there to protect themselves. That's not to say that teachers can't talk among themselves, but there should be times when students come and you say, "We're going to talk about this class, problems, what kid did what, you know, talk it out." This type of "involvement" maybe should replace this year's notion of trying to set up a legislative model, a government model in a traditional sense of a number of cells or number of houses, or representative subgroups which then are represented in a major form. That model implies a role, of being personally responsible and taking a "public" view of issues, which is pretty hard for some kids, and those who <u>can</u> sustain it really turn off the kids who can't. So far as decisions go, students' roles could be within class or project contexts, somewhere that self-interest really gets engaged. Melva's current affairs group is a good example where I think

they do make a fair amount of decisions together. Community day planning was the same. I just don't think that staff will accept students' acting autonomously on their own definitions of self-interest on large matters. We're not ready for large-scale confrontation politics, just as we seem unready for serious "legislative" politics.

It seems to me there will be problems with any system. Personally I think the staff has to learn to allow the kids to make some <u>real</u> mistakes. If you only let them make fake mistakes, or inconsequential mistakes, then you really haven't allowed the thing to survive, to struggle with itself. This year staff have to be able to let go a bit. (The ad-hoc jury comes to my mind now, and the discussions among black and white students.) But with the jury, many staff felt, "The thing is out of control, the kids really muffed it." Personally, despite all the complaining I don't think students muffed it so badly, though the procedure certainly didn't look like your model trial or hearing. There has to be a clearer relation between the structures that are set up, students' abilities and interests, and staff willingness. These three are all interwoven, and we never really untangled them this year.